

WASHINGTON STAR
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A Feeling of Being Watched

Maybe it was just the coincidence of a John Le Carre spy flick on the tube the day after the Central Intelligence Agency admitted it has been training our local police departments in surveillance techniques. That's enough to make even the most passive observer of the world about him start noticing stuff that might have escaped his attention earlier.

All I know is, some mighty strange things have been happening around here lately. The first incident occurred in the produce section of the supermarket. I was studying the lettuce display, trying to figure out if the romaine had been picked by non-union harvesters or had simply been run over by a truck, when suddenly I became aware that a woman was speaking to me.

I turned and looked, and so help me, it was Simone Signoret, right down to the drooping cigarette and the head scarf.

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"I said, 'Can you tell me where the Chinese cabbage might be?'" she repeated, in an amazingly deft hill-country accent.

"Isn't that it there?" I asked, pointing.

"That's celery," she said darkly, adjusting her babushka, which had slipped to reveal pink plastic hair curlers. Simone Signoret in pink plastic hair curlers? Too much, I thought. And yet . . .

"Do you suppose they have any Jerusalem artichokes?" she said, her tone casual yet somehow fraught with meaning and oddly menacing.

That did it. First Chinese

cabbage, then Jerusalem artichokes. Next she'd be asking about Russian dressing. I know code messages when I hear them.

"I swear I don't know anything about it!" I blurted, and fled into the dairy section. As I looked back, she was deep in conversation with the produce manager, who looked for all the world like What's-his-name; you know, the guy with the mustache Hitchcock always uses to throw us off the scent.

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I hurried past deli, doubled back through pet foods and then, abandoning my shopping cart, squeezed out past a large woman who was buying twelve dozen eggs and a six-pack of Schlitz. Got to start noticing things like that. I told myself. Could make a difference.

Next day, in the pub — that is, the restaurant where I usually take my lunch, as I was studying the flyspecks in the mirror I couldn't help noticing a man at a corner table eyeing me intently. He looked familiar. Was he the traitor in "Topaz," maybe?

I swung around casually on my stool and deliberately caught his eye. He smiled and nodded. Pretty cool customer.

"Alvin," I said to the bartender, "who is that in the corner, the gink in the black topcoat and the gray beard?"

"Don't you remember, you had a big discussion with him the other day about impoundment," said Alvin, buffing a flyspeck.

Alvin was crazy. There had been no such discussion. I stretched, said, "I'm going to

make a phone call," and ducked out the back door. I'll go back for my overcoat some other time, when this has all blown over.

It's getting worse. On the street, a caricature of a wino tries to bum a quarter for coffee. "What's that supposed to mean?" I snarl. He walks off, muttering strangely, and I have to lean against a lamp-post for a minute to get hold of myself.

At work, an assistant managing editor I never saw before drops a mysterious document on my desk and says, "See what you can find out about this PTA meeting, will you?" Is it a trap? Why are they after me, anyway? Needless to say, when I dial the phone number on the letter-head, there is no answer.

The payoff comes when I am driving home late the next night and the old familiar red light starts blinking in the back window. I pull over and wait, knuckles white on the steering wheel.

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"Say, Mac, did you know your right rear taillight isn't working?" he says with elaborate casualness.

I look up at him dully, and notice without real surprise that it is Joseph Cotten. With my last ounce of self-control, I manage to keep my voice even as I say, "Thanks, officer, I'll attend to it first thing in the morning."

Ha! First thing in the morning, indeed! Who knows where I'll be by then? Where we'll all be? My God, when will it end? When will they make their move? All I want is to come in from the cold.

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